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Memorial of William P. Townsend · 1903

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MEMORIAL.

Testimony of Birmingham Monthly Meeting of Friends, held the thirty-first of Twelfth Month, 1902, concerning our late beloved friend WILLIAM P. TOWNSEND, *who departed this life the twenty-fourth of Eighth Month, 1902, aged eighty-nine years and nineteen days.*

Although the memory of our departed friend is precious to many minds, yet it is not our purpose in issuing this testimony to his worth, to extol the individual, but rather to magnify that Divine Grace which, when submitted to, humbles the creature and which wrought in him to the changing of his desires and pursuits after the follies and transitory pleasures of this life, to a desire after holiness, and the pursuit of those lasting enjoyments which are in store for all the cross-bearing followers of the Lamb of God.

As he was brought into submission, to that grace "which bringeth salvation," he

became qualified thereby to fill important stations in the church, and to exert an influence for good in the community at large, filling with acceptance the responsible position of Elder in our Monthly Meeting, and was also a member of the Meeting for Sufferings, and of the Westtown Committee. A sincere lover of the Truth was he, deeply interested in everything tending to promote the welfare of the Society, for the real unity and harmony of which he was livingly concerned.

He and his estimable wife, being well grounded in the doctrines and testimonies of Friends, and qualified by grace and experience to instil them into the minds of others, and having a loving interest in the best welfare of the younger members of the Society, opened their house for meetings of that class.

Twenty-three young Friends met accordingly at the home of William P. and Anna M. Townsend, under a feeling of the importance of more fully understanding the principles and testimonies of the Society of which they were members.

Those meetings were held every two weeks, with but little exception, through

the winter and early spring months, and the interest in them continued until their close. They were felt to be seasons of profit.

The last of these gatherings occurred on the evening of Fourth Month 4th, 1900, in which the subject of this Memoir, as well as his worthy companion, took an interested part. The latter had long been a patient sufferer of varying and often acute bodily affliction, and was feeling much weakness on this occasion. On the morning of Fourth Month 6th, she arose to minister to her husband's comfort, and lying down again, her spirit was in a few brief moments released from its tenement of clay to receive the reward for her good deeds done in the name of Christ.

William P. Townsend's parents being members of our religious Society he thereby inherited a right of membership amongst us. He was born in West Chester, Pa., on the fifth of Eighth Month, 1813. According to his own account and what is known by others, his early life was marred by many misspent hours, a natural fondness for music and other allurements of a gay and fashionable life, leading him far away from the

principles and practices of the Society of which he was a member.

From an account which our friend wrote when about the sixty-third year of his age, of some of the religious exercises and incidents of his early life, we take the following: "About the fourteenth or fifteenth year of my age, being from home at a boarding school and not well in health, my mind was brought under religious impressions for some months, which, however, passed away on my return to health and mixing again with the world. My father's store being central in regard to business and society, I was much exposed in many ways, and but for the protecting care of an ever merciful and over-ruling Providence I would have fallen a victim to some of the many temptations by which I was surrounded.

"My time was, however, much given up to frivolity in the intervals of business, spending considerable of it in learning music as well as dancing, both of which I was fond of and thought to excel in. I also took lessons in boxing, or as it was called by the teachers of it, 'the science of self-defence;' the excuse being to improve physical development."

He also speaks of "becoming at this time much interested in the study of some of the natural sciences." The time thus spent did not cause him regret as did that spent in music, dancing and frivolous conversation, for these scientific pursuits "threw me," he notes, "into the society of those generally older than myself and who were looked up to as leading men of the place, and men of general uprightness of character."

It appears from his account, that even during the time his mind was much devoted to folly and worldly engagements, he was not entirely insensible to religion, for he says "a strong desire often arose in my mind to know and experience for myself the benefits of its protection." In seeking after this, he frequented for a time the meetings of the Methodists and assisted in establishing a First-day school in their place of worship; but on the Presbyterians establishing a place of worship in West Chester, he says, "To this I sometimes went, seeking with others for some solid foundation for religious faith, but the way felt very dark to me. Subsequent to this and in my early years, although I was a man pretty well

grown, the Episcopalians established a meeting in West Chester, and one of my most intimate friends being an active, and I now believe, a sincere member of that Society, I was induced to join hands with him and some other leading men of the place in establishing their meeting, and finally in the erection of a spacious place of worship. I was much interested in the setting up of this meeting, in the building of the house, and was for several years a member of what is called the vestry, a body which manages the affairs of the Society, but not necessarily in membership with it. I took part in singing in the choir, but never felt a liberty or inclination to unite myself in membership with it."

"During all these years of wide departure from the strait and narrow path, I was at times made sensible of a great want. 'That which is lacking cannot be numbered.' I felt that there was a something in religious belief and experience that I had not yet been able to find in any sect with whom I had been associated, although I was desirous of doing so. It was whilst under such desires that a small tract issued by the 'Tract Association of Friends' fell in my way, the

reading of which was, I humbly believe, under Divine mercy, the means of turning my feet from the broad way that leadeth down to destruction and death into the narrow path that leadeth to light, life and peace. It occurred in this way: one First-day afternoon in the summer of 1843, sitting with a number of other young men on my father's front steps, a carriage passed along the street from which a tract was dropped. I immediately picked it up. An opportunity presenting soon after, I sought a retired place on the Brandywine, and read it with much interest, and I hope profit. I am not able now to name the particular publication, but (it told of) some one who had gone as far astray and been as deeply soiled by contact with the pleasures and pursuits of the world as I had. The reading of this tract was blessed to me, inasmuch as it raised in my mind a ray of hope that there was yet left for me a way to the knowledge of the blessed Truth, even if it should be among my own poor despised people, as I had always looked upon them to be. During all my years, however, of gayety and frivolity, I ever entertained a hearty respect for a consistent Friend."

Our friend records some events in which he seems to have narrowly escaped serious injury; twice from being thrown from his horse, and once in a gunning accident. His preservation at those times he afterwards attests as among the evidences of Divine mercy extended to him in his then unregenerate state. A trying circumstance in his life occurring about this time brought William P. Townsend into great distress of mind, and he dates his first deep religious impressions to this period, when his anguish of spirit was so terrible that he felt unable to bear it, and he says, "I sought my heavenly Father's help, earnestly desiring that he would be pleased to interpose for my relief. He was graciously pleased to hear my cry." He goes on to say: "I think it proper to mention in connection with this circumstance that although I was at this time in the way of attending other places of worship, seldom if ever at a Friend's meeting, but when this deep trouble overtook me, the sad consequences of my own rash folly, I could find in all the ceremonies at those places of worship no solace for my wounded spirit, and instinctively sought the quiet of Friends' meeting; being conscious,

even in that benighted condition that there was there to be found a nearer access to the Source and Fountain of all good than elsewhere; and to this day I can recall the solemn feelings experienced in that silent meeting."

Although he was thus followed by the "reproofs of instruction, which are the way of life," there was not, as appears from his diary, a full surrender of his heart to Him who was thus following Him in mercy until about the thirtieth year of his age, when in the autumn of the year in which the reading of the tract alluded to had been blessed to him, he says: "I, with two or three of my gay young companions, entered Orange Street Meeting House, Philadelphia, taking our seats far back in the house. Soon after, our friend William Evans arose in the gallery and commenced an impressive communication, quoting, I think it was, the sixteenth verse of the forty-second chapter of Isaiah: "And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not, I will lead them in paths that they have not known; I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them and not forsake them:" and

brought the subject so close home to me that I was as one struck dumb, my knees ready to smite together, and the feeling, as I now remember, was a strong desire to shrink within myself. He proceeded at considerable length, and so forcibly did I feel the arrow of conviction in my heart that I was enabled then and there to make covenant, and close in with the offers of Divine mercy that had been working in my mind for some time previous. It made a strong and comforting impression on my mind, and from that day forward I have, through great mercy, never been permitted to doubt of the goodness as well as immediate superintendence of our Heavenly Father, however unworthy some of us feel of the least of his notice and regard. I was still in my gay clothes, but soon after found a man who made plain coats and had one made."

Although a marked change was now wrought in him and his feet turned from the broad into the narrow path, yet he found the work of Divine grace was not completed; there were enemies of his own house that the warfare had to be maintained against. One of the most potent of these seems to have been a hasty, impetuous temper, which

he often alludes to in his diary as being a source of frequent distress of mind for having given way to it. Thus, on Tenth Month 25th, 1844, he writes: "In the afternoon confined to the store and to my sorrow and regret (keenly felt, but in that instance too late) I gave way to my naturally quick and haughty temper, which manifested itself by angry words and was followed by sullen looks towards a customer who had been the cause of the irritation. Oh! what a task it is to overcome it: unaided it never can be done: Oh! that I may earnestly look and depend upon the only true and effectual Helper." Eleventh Month 10th he makes the following entry in his diary: "It being, I believe, one year this day since I was enabled to make a change in my dress, I thought it would be satisfactory to refer to that, at this period, and say how thankful I feel that the step has been taken, although dark shadows have, during the past year, been permitted to rest upon my path, at times almost obliterating its course. Although indifference and unfaithfulness on my part have retarded my spiritual progress, yet feeling my own unworthiness and present weak state, I cannot but express the

sincere convictions that this state is one infinitely to be preferred to that in which I was." It is interesting to note in William P. Townsend's religious experiences which he has noted down in his diary, how, like the apostle Paul, while fighting the "good fight" he seems to "have kept the faith" in that Divine power which was gradually working out his redemption.

Second Month 22nd, 1846.—He writes: "Arose this morning with peaceful, comfortable feelings which continued with me until near evening, when being engaged in outward concerns which did not go on quite smoothly, I gave way in inward feeling to irritability of temper, and if I did not manifest it, which I fear I did, I felt it and acknowledged it to be one of my greatest weaknesses. But although it is hard indeed at times to struggle against its advances, I do feel engaged to keep up the warfare, believing and trusting in that Divine Arm for help which has been so mercifully stretched forth for my succor and aid. In looking back to what I was and to where I was only a few years since, and in reflecting upon what has been done for me, a song of thankfulness arises in my breast, accompanied by

an ardent desire that He who has been graciously disposed thus far to lead me on my way will not leave me nor forsake me amidst the pitfalls and dangers by which my daily walk amongst men is surrounded."

Three days later he makes note, "I have sometimes inquired of myself whether or not I am sufficiently cheerful and social in my own immediate family circle. I fear to trust my tongue with any liberty, knowing full well the propensity that prevails to run itself dry and scatter to the four winds those precious feelings with which I am at times favored."

To recount all the varied experiences which our dear departed friend has recorded of the work and power of Divine grace, exemplified in his life and character, would extend this memorial beyond proper limits. Passing on to the later years of his life, we find under date of Eighth Month 5th, 1893, this entry: "This day completes the eightieth year of my life. How wonderful does it appear in the retrospect, both spiritually and physically, and how serious as to the future. It is now about fifty years since my feet were mercifully turned from the broad into the narrow path in which I have

found a peaceful rest, that I was unable to find in all this world had offered in its most captivating forms, or in the performance of the rites and ceremonies of other religious societies. Oh! that I could be sufficiently thankful now that the shadows of life are perceptibly lengthening. My greatest desire is that He who so wonderfully drew me out of the vortex of fashionable life, establishing my feet on the everlasting Rock of Ages, will in his great mercy continue to be round about me and preserve me from offending Him in thought, word or deed.

First Month 1st, 1896.—After recording with thankfulness the improved physical condition of himself and wife, he adds: "But above all, we are sometimes favored to feel peace and quietness to reign in our little family, accompanied by an humble hope that however unworthy of so great a favor, a door of mercy will be opened for us when done with this tribulated state of existence, through the life, suffering, death and ascension of Him who died to save sinners."

Eighth Month 5th, 1898.—He writes in his diary: "This day I complete my eighty-fifth year and desire to record how much I have to be grateful for; in full possession

of all my mental faculties, better health than in former years, and a little sense of unmerited favor in a peace of mind that surpasses all else, is at times to be felt, though feeling myself unworthy."

Third Month 29th, 1899.—He adds: "I can feelingly confirm the above, only an increased sense of unmerited mercies." This appears to be the last entry our friend made in his diary, though he continued for some time after this date to be able to enjoy the blessings of life with an ever grateful heart. While often a sufferer from bodily ailment he was mostly able to get to our meetings when the weather was not too inclement, and frequently to attend the fortnightly meetings of the West Chester reading circle, in which he took an active and useful interest, and where his presence was appreciated by all, and especially by the young Friends.

The last occasion of his getting out to meeting was in attending our monthly meeting held the second of Seventh Month, 1902, after which his increasing bodily ailments were accompained with very severe suffering which he was enabled to bear with remarkable Christian fortitude and patience.

His desires, were answered, that he might in his extreme suffering be preserved in word and deed from anything that would bring any stain upon the cause of Truth. There was one occasion before being confined to his bed when he had three consecutive hours of quiet rest and sleep. His heart seemed filled to overflowing with gratitude to our Heavenly Father for those three hours of freedom from pain, and upon his knees he offered up a prayer of thanksgiving for what he felt was such a favor to him. He was soon after confined to his bed, where the intensity of his sufferings, as well as the means used to mitigate them, tended to weaken the powers of the mind, but from his frequent ejaculations and petitions it was evident that his heart was fixed, trusting in the Lord.

On the morning of Eighth Month 24th, death brought release, but there was no sting with it, neither did the grave have any victory. The grace of God which bringeth salvation had triumphed. Divine mercy, we reverently believe, opened heaven's gates and the ransomed soul entered its heavenly mansion.

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